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## Epsom Churches

### The Free Will Baptist Church

#### FOUNDING AND EARLY YEARS OF THE BAPTIST CHURCH, EPSOM, NH

By Rev. Donald E. Macomber



An excellent account of the formation of our church, originally called the Freewill Baptist Church, is found in a sermon preached by Rev. John W. Scribner in 1899 on the 75th anniversary of our church. This sermon is one of several on the history of this church and is as follows "The Freewill Baptist Church of Epsom was late in the field. The first, the NewDurham, only 22 miles distant, was formed in 1780, Pittsfield 1791, Canterbury 1798, Gilmanton 1820, Sanborn 1823, Raymond 1824, same year as Epsom. Chichester a year later in 1825. Northwood and Nottingham were still later. By

1824 it was high time that another church should be formed in Epsom. It could not be said that the Congregational Church was meeting the wants of the town. It does not appear that there had been any marked revival of religion in town until 1819, more than 90 years after the first settlement. There was a growing sentiment against a state church, against taxing all the people for the support of a church they did not believe in. It is true that when Rev. Curtis came in 1815, the secular power was broken, and the Congregational church became independent of town support, and a great revival followed, but the fact that the town voted in 1820 to have the meeting house half the time to this Denomination, shows the place was ripening for another church. The population of the town justified it, there is probably today in New Hampshire, one church for every 600 people, and Epsom had over 1300. The place was growing, and sin was growing also, for there were in 1827, nine open taverns. Our main road, called the Turnpike, was a road of great travel, even from far off Vermont, the teams passed through this town for Portsmouth and Portland. Epsom was a place of business. There were eight grist mills, ten saw-mills, four port mills, three carding machines and three clothier shops. The demand for another church was manifest from the start. It appears that in June in 1824, there were preliminary meetings, in which the propriety of forming a church was discussed. Arthur Caverno, who was ordained a few months before, was teaching in town and was ready for a pastorate. On the first day of July 1824, a meeting was held at the school house near the meeting house, on or near the spot where the Epsom Center School House now stands. (now a private home.) It was Thursday. Elder Ebenezer Knowlton of Pittsfield was there, and there were eight persons already to be organized into a church." This is all Rev. Scribner tells us of how our church began, but we have more of the inside story from Rev. Caverno's own lips, from an address which he gave in 1874 on the fiftieth anniversary of the church. He relates: "I was engaged by the town to teach the village school and preached on the Sabbath. Prior to my entrance into the town, I learned that religious prejudices ran high, which made it a little difficult to manage the school, but I succeeded and

kept out the winter term. I resolved to be no party man, to take sides in no religious quarrels, but to do my duty both as preacher and teacher and leave consequences with the Lord. During the period of my teaching, I became very much interested in prayer for a revival of religion. The "free people" in town, they were called, were scattered like sheep having no shepherd. I felt that a revival would bring them together, and that the result might be the embodiment of the few believers among them into church relationship. One night I dreamed that I saw the fields around my boarding place one vast field of wheat all ripe for harvest. The hens had commenced their depredations upon it. I said to a friend who by the way, was a professor of religion, it is a pity that the wheat should be destroyed, and if you will take hold with me, we will reap and secure it. But he declined. Throwing off my coat I grasped the sickle and in a little while had the pleasure to see the field reaped and the precious grain gathered into the garner. This encouraged me to hope for a revival. I related the dream to the friend whom I saw in my sleep, and said to him that I felt a strong conviction that we were about to be blessed with a revival of religion. But he seemed as unbelieving as the lord of old on whose hand the king learned and replied in similar language, "If the Lord would open windows in heaven, what might this thing be?"

When the church was organized. A meeting was appointed for the Fourth of July for our first baptism (1824). It was held in William Marden's barn (later the site of buildings owned by Walter Sawyer near the traffic circle, and now Dunkin Doughnuts) and at the close of the morning service we repaired to the Suncook River where three happy souls were planted in the likeness of Christ's death, and came out of the water rejoicing in the truth. In the afternoon a discourse was preached from the text, "so run that ye may obtain." This was followed by warm and powerful exhortation, accompanied with a deep and manifest interest in the congregation. All hearts were melted into tenderness and every eye was suffused with tears. As the result of this meeting twelve precious souls came forward on to the barn floor for prayers, and the most of them were soon converted. This gave great encouragement to the little church and inspired them with the spirit of prayer for the glorious outpouring of the Holy Spirit which was abundantly realized. The revival spread into the different parts of the town, and partially into other towns. It continued through the summer and extended into the fall months, so that from eight the church increased to some fifty souls. The meetings were spiritual, harmonious and heavenly. Among the converts baptized were brothers D.C. Cilley and James McCutcheon who afterwards became ministers of the gospel and were greatly blessed in their labors. "It is noteworthy that the greatest number of persons ever received into this church in a single year, was the first year of its life when 51 joined, 49 in the first six months. Truly our church was born out of a Holy Spirit revival. Mr. James McCutcheon became second pastor of the church. He was one of the original members, had studied for the ministry, and moved to Deerfield. It was toward the end of his pastorate, ten years after the church's organization, that its first meeting house was built at a cost of \$800.00. It is noteworthy that we had a building of our own 11 years earlier than the Congregationalists, though they had already been here for 63 years. This was the first meeting house not built by the town, to be erected. McCutcheon was criticized for one thing - he lived six miles away and he would help the men float logs down the river on Sunday on his way home from church. This same year of 1834 is to be remembered also for a second remarkable revival. The human instrument was Elder Benjamin Manson, who came here from Meredith to hold special meetings. In one of his sermons of 1899, Rev. Scribner relates of this revival: "Some felt that God was about to revive his work. A gathering Spirit had been noticed for some months. The church entered into covenant twice a day for a month that God would revive His work ... Elder Manson visited from house to house and preached every evening in some part of the town. In a few days the Lord appeared among His people in a wonderful manner, souls came forward for prayers at every meeting." One of those

baptized in this revival was William Goss, one of the family after which Gossville was named. These revivals were part of the great nation-wide revivals under Charles G. Finney. About this time Elder Manson himself became the church's pastor at the age of 31. During his two year stay, he did much for the church. He caused the first deacons to be chosen. The way they were chosen is most interesting. A meeting was called at the home of Ephraim Locke and then pastor Manson and another man went into another room. Then the members of the church were called in one by one and his or her choice for deacon given. Ephraim Locke and Thomas Bickford were chosen. Their names can be found on one of the windows of our church. At this time membership of our church was about 80, Manson also was the first to introduce a Sunday School, and he also formed a Home Mission Society in the church. After a year's pastorate by Hiram Holmes, a young man of 30 by the name of Van Dame came to Epsom from Deerfield to teach in the school. He supplied the vacant pulpit but stayed less than a year. This was his only pastorate. He was a great scholar; some considered him somewhat eccentric. He visited every family in town and conversed on religious matters. He left \$100.00 to the church for books for the Sunday School library, every book to bear his name. He is also remembered for a hymn which he composed, My Bible Lead to Glory. At this time the combined membership of the Congregational and Baptist churches was 255, one fifth of the population of the town, the highest it has ever been. The first pastor to receive a stated salary (1st year \$150.00) was Gordon P. Ramsey who came to this church at the age of 27 and was considered a well educated man. Some were not in sympathy with such new notions as a salary or an educated ministry but he was generally well liked. It is said that his wife, whom he married while here, became more famous than he, and was distinguished as a writer of poetry. The present parsonage was built in 1853 (cost with land, \$800.00) while Moses Quimby was pastor. He must have been well liked for he was here 4 different times. During his second pastorate, our present church building was built at a cost of \$2200.00 and dedicated the Christmas of 1861. This same year the church at New Rye was erected by the Christian denomination which later united with the Congregationalists. In some twenty-seven years later the vestry, a gift of the women, was added. Here we must stop. Perhaps other pens will bring the story up-to-date. We have seen how our church was born

and nurtured in revival. Today we must look to the Lord for revival if we are to survive and continue to proclaim God's redeeming love for lost mankind. May God grant it.



#### CENTENNIAL OF THE PRESENT EPSOM BAPTIST CHURCH 1861-1961 (Author unknown)

The Freewill Baptist Church in Epsom was organized July 1, 1824, under the leadership of Elder Arthur Caverno, its first pastor. For ten years worship services were held in Deacon Marden's barn at Marden's Comer (now the traffic circle). A society to handle business affairs was organized, and the first church building erected in 1834, on the

present site.

The church began in revival among a small group of believers, which resulted in their reaching out to other, so that the church was evangelistic from the first. Serious discipline problems soon arose, which were met in a forth-right manner, with due deliberation but no beating around the bush. However, every time the reviving power of the Holy Spirit came upon the little flock, the records indicate that discipline problems vanished. The positive power of the Spirit of God in the lives of men and women exercised more effective discipline than the negative restraints imposed by men. Early records show that the people

who formed it desired a "free" church, that is, one not linked with town and state government; and that the type of church life they envisioned was intensely practical. For instance, two sins expressed were that the members would not "grudge" one another in such matters as dress; and they would care for the poor among their own number. By 1861 the Society felt the need of a more commodious building. William Goss bought the old building and removed it to Gossville where, enlarge and altered, it remains as a store and Post Office. [see photo on History of Epsom WebPages] The building was moved by oxen. When they reached the place where Fred Knight now lives, the church stuck fast and could not be dislodged. It was Saturday night. The building was so badly tipped that when the worshippers sat in the pews on Sunday morning, some became seasick because of the angle at which they were tilted. Quoting the church record April 1, 1861 The winter past, the Lord has again revived His work. The church has been quickened into a new life interest, and quite a number of souls have found the Savior. The Society has decided to build a new house of worship this season, and this with the revival gives afresh interest in all things. Tho' the beginning of the terrible civil war makes things look dark, and is paralyzing the industrial pursuits of life, our hope of success is in the Most High. "There were baptisms twice in August and once in September. Again quoting the records December 25, 1861 A happy Christmas to us, tho' stormy, in dedication of our new house of worship. For about thirty years the church worshipped in the old house, where we saw much of the power of God in the conversions of souls, from time to time. All felt that the time had come when we needed a more convenient house to worship in. An effort was made to raise a subscription sufficient to build a new house, and in this were successful. The old house was disposed of without much difficulty and the stockholders of the new decided on the same site as the old. The work was commenced in the latter part of May and completed in December. Brother James B. Stanton of West Lebanon, Me. was the master workman and won high esteem as a workman and manager. The pews sold readily and all were perfectly satisfied with the new house. The house was dedicated to the worship of God, December 25, 1861. Elder MA. Quimby, the pastor of the church, preached the sermon. 'And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place; this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven. His outline for the sermon:

1. Some of the appropriate uses of the house of God.
2. The immense value of Christian opportunities in the house of God

The exercises were interesting and quite satisfactory to all. We felt that the Lord had prepared us beyond our expectations. May this church edifice long stand consecrated to the worship of the Most High, and constantly occupied with an intelligent and spiritual ministry of attentive hearers. The Lord make it the birthplace of many souls, who shall shine as the stars forever and ever. Thomas Tripp, Clerk Epsom, NH Dec. 25, 1861 Thus our present church building was erected in troubled times. In February 1861 the Confederacy was formed at Montgomery, Ala. Jefferson Davis arrived in Richmond, Va. on June 30th and Richmond was made the capital of the new Confederacy. The border states hesitated, but Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri stayed in the Union. The upper Mississippi Valley states were loyal; they wanted no custom houses between themselves and New Orleans. Fort Sumter, S.C. was fired upon April 12 and fell April 15. The flag of the United States of America had been fired on. April 15 President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to join with the regular army in putting down the rebellion. The North expected the war to be over in months. The South also felt that it had reasonable expectations of a speedy victory. The South did not have to conquer the North in order to win, all it had to do was convince the North that the North could not win. Many regular army officers including Robert E. Lee, had gone over to the Confederacy. The spirit of the Southern men was more martial. England and France were expected to sympathize with the South. The Northwest would want to settle the quarrel quietly in order

to keep the Mississippi River open for commerce. Lincoln agreed that the Federal Government could not interfere with slavery in any state and wanted a constitutional amendment to settle that question. News from the front was bad. July brought the monstrous defeat for the North at Bull Run. Men's hearts were failing them for fear. Yet this was the year in which Epsom people built this house in which we worship today. What kind of men were they who built this house: The same sort of men whose loyalty, courage and devotion saved the Union and preserved for us "one nation under God, indivisible". Your grandfathers and great-grandfathers were the men. It is dangerous to single out a few to mention, but there are three whose position and prominence must let them stand for many worthy of mention but unnamed. Of William Goss the Merrimack County History says: "In the building of the new church in Gossville, too much credit cannot be given Mr. Goss for the energy, perseverance and persistence with which he advocated and assisted the enterprise. When others were discouraged and ready to abandon the matter altogether, he took the leadership and bore, for the time being, the burden himself, and carried it forward to completion. "William Goss was born July 13, 1820, received on June 10, 1848, to membership of the church after baptism, which took place June 25, 1848. He was a member of the Society, and also an ardent Democrat. He built many of the houses in Gossville and died May 2, 1887. Thomas Tripp kept clear and informative records of this period, sensitive to human and spiritual aspects of the life of the church. He was clerk from 1845 to 1871 and Deacon from 1855 to 1871. Many names which appear in the records are still represented in town. Doubtless family tradition preserves the memory of the worship service and staunch character of the men and women who labored as they lived, for God and Country during the stormy times of the War Between the States. Pastoral leadership when this house was built was in the hands of the Rev. Moses A. Quimby, whose four pastorates of this church included some of the most fruitful seasons in the work of Christ in this community. Elder Quimby was pastor from September 1850 to April 1858; from April 1860 to April 1863; from November 1869 to January 1872; from April 1885 to April 1887, a total of fourteen and two-thirds years. For a pastor to serve the same church twice is rare, four pastorates with intervals between probably constitutes a unique record, and a more eloquent testimony to the worth of the man than an even longer continuous pastorate would be. Each of his pastorates was marked by revival from beginning to end. Revival among the brethren stimulated interest among the unconverted, resulting in conversions of new born souls. Such were the men who built this church. You whose family traditions include them may profitably indulge imagination in picturing this sturdy men and women, boys and girls who filled this house in its earliest days. May the memories and associations stimulate us all to like devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, the head of the Church, that the sacrifices and successes of 1861 may be renewed in 1961. This building cost about \$2,200.00, besides donated labor and material. Pews sold for \$50.00 and some families needed two. There was no vestibule, instead of the present central door, two doors led immediately outdoors. Between them was a raised platform for the choir, high enough to house the Sabbath School library underneath. Among benefactors of this library is the Rev. Bartholomew Van Dame, who, though pastor for only one year, 1837-8, when he was a young man. Many years later he left by his will \$100.00, the income to buy books for this church. The congregation turned around to face the choir when singing the hymns. At one time a melodeon was used, then a reed organ, until this present pipe organ was installed. The windows were plain and smaller than the present windows. The pews were white with brown tops and painfully straight backed. But one could bring his own cushion and a cricket for the feet, if desired. At the front on either side were facing seats for the deacons, who were active in assisting the pastor with the administration of the church affairs. Heat was furnished by large wood stoves at the rear with funnels the length of the room. Perhaps the habit of sitting as near the rear as possible was thereby promoted. Belfry and bell were later additions, with the vestibule. The vestry was added in 1888 through the efforts of the women. Memorial windows were installed during the pastorate of the Rev. J. Woodbury Scribner in the 1890's. With the installation of a furnace first for wood and then coal and now

converted to oil, and the addition of electric lights, the story of major changes brings us up to date. Last summer the church interior was redecorated. As we sit in this house today, the pews are comfortable, the lighting better, the instrumental music more abundant. Stained glass windows turn our thoughts inward rather than drawing them outward to the world. Our clothing is different, and our thoughts are far different, for the world has changed in a hundred years, changed more and more rapidly than in any previous century of human history. Yet the same human needs remain, the same hearts cry for expression, forgiveness, love and understanding. And the same Divine Power to meet these needs is available today in Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. For me, there is no place to worship quite like the Epsom Baptist Church. It is "a place for quiet rest, near the heart of God" rich with my memories of more than a third of its long century. I think that many of you feel the same way about this house. Let us cherish it, keep it clean and beautiful, filled with the sincere praises and fervent prayers of earnest men and women, and the glad songs of boys and girls, resounding always with the compassionate voice of faithful preaching of "full of the promises of the Word of God" until Jesus comes again.

